

## WHAT IS UNIVERSAL DESIGN?

The built environment has traditionally been designed for a healthy, able-bodied, non-elderly adult. Since that description fits less than 15 percent of our population, the result is environments, including kitchens and bathrooms, which create handicaps and barriers for the rest of us. Demographics, legislation, public awareness and personal experience are making us examine some of the basic assumptions we have used in design, particularly in high function areas like the kitchen and bath. The result is design that breaks the traditional molds and is more flexible and adaptable. It is accessible to or useable by all people, regardless of age, size or physical ability, as much as possible. This is Universal Design.

**Universal design** takes into consideration a wide variety of users for a room or building. For efficient universal design, a designer will try to plan a room that can be used by a 6'3" man, his 5'3" wife or a child or elderly parent. Appliance heights are as important as clearances for doorways, and even color selections used. After all, universal design also takes into consideration those with disabilities. Those with poor vision can benefit from greater color variants. For example, a designer might create a floor that has a significantly different color than the stairs that lead down to it.

**Aging in place** is another huge movement on the design scene. While it sometimes gets readily interchanged with universal design, there are differences. Aging in place concentrates on the needs and the requirements of those moving into retirement age – but not moving out of their homes. This is a very important consideration in today's world for a number of reasons. Due to advances in medicine, from treatment to prevention, people are living longer than ever before. Another reason that aging in place has become such a hot topic is because the baby boomers are starting to hit retirement age. They represent more than one in four adults in the U.S. in Canada, and many boomers would prefer to stay in their current homes well into their golden years.

If you keep some of these considerations in mind when working with your kitchen designer, the result will be a kitchen that is not only beautiful and functional for you *today*, but also one with enhanced longevity and resale value.

*(Above information from Profiles Magazine, a publication for members of the National Kitchen and Bath Association, Winter 2008 Volume 7 Issue 1, and from the FAQ's section of the NKBA website. For excellent consumer education, visit [www.nkba.org](http://www.nkba.org))*